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ABSTRACT

The author discusses his 1981 critique of social studies education, "Social Studies: Some Gulfs and Priorities," written for "The Social Studies," the Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. This paper recounts the main points of that critique and theorizes about the criticism it received. (BT)

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SOCIAL STUDIES: SOME GULFS AND PRIORITIES-- A RECONSIDERATION

NCSS -- College and University Assembly -- San Antonio
November 16, 2000
Howard D.Mehlinger

INTRODUCTION

Two decades ago, O.L. Davis, Jr. and I co-edited *The Social Studies*, the Eightieth Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education. It was expected to be an important event. While NSSE annually publishes yearbooks on important topics in education, it had published yearbooks on social studies on only two previous occasions: *The Social Studies in Elementary and Secondary School* (1923) and *Social Studies in the Elementary School* (1957). This would be the first time that NSSE had considered the social studies in a comprehensive manner. Because the readers of NSSE yearbooks are drawn from all sectors of education, Davis and I sought to design a book that would provide readers a general picture of the condition of social studies in 1981. The book was divided into two sections: 1) The Status of Social Studies and 2) Issues in the Social Studies. With the help of an advisory committee we identified authors who seemed by reputation to be the best individuals to treat the "status" of social studies or to deal with one or more of the "issues" the affected the field.

I wrote the final chapter of the Yearbook. It was titled:" Social Studies: Some Gulfs and Priorities". While my chapter appeared at the end of the Yearbook, it was not intended to be a summary of the preceding chapters, although some of the themes and topics of previous chapters found their way into the chapter. Rather, my intention was to write a compelling, intellectual essay about the fundamental problems that beset social studies and to offer a partial solution for resolving these problems. The problems I hoped to identify were macro problems, not the kind of topics that typically appeared in social studies articles. I also hoped to write something that would be very readable; I had become weary and somewhat impatient with much academic writing and wanted to contribute a piece that would be interesting and provocative.

The chapter opened with the following paragraph: "Blame it on the autumn season when this essay was written; or chalk it up to bad biorhythms. But these do not account for my melancholy as I reflect on the condition of social studies. It is social studies, not I, that suffers from depression." The next paragraph began: "Perhaps social studies is even dead, and we have been too busy to notice or unwilling to admit it." I then described how something could be dead and yet appear to be alive because of the help of sophisticated life support systems. I sought to explain the malaise I found in the social studies by treating three "gulfs": the gulf between the profession and the general public, the gulf between "leaders" and classroom teachers, and the gulf between social studies specialists and academic scholars.

GULFS

I argued that social studies was crippled in part because professional educators had lost the confidence and respect of the general public. I used the growth of textbook censorship as evidence of lack of confidence in curriculum choices being made by educators. The year the Yearbook appeared was also the time when Ronald Reagan became President, after a campaign that featured the need to return schools to local communities and reduce the role of the Federal government. I also discussed the gulf that existed between "leaders" in social studies and classroom teachers. The term "leaders" was

placed in quotation marks because there cannot technically be leaders without followers. I argued that the issues that fascinated social studies leaders, i.e. the people who publish, hold professional offices, edit journals, make conference addresses, are relatively obscure and uninteresting to typical classroom teachers. And the problems that teachers face each day do not attract the attention of the leaders As President of NCSS in 1977, I was aware of the tensions that existed within NCSS. From time to time, CUFA members even threatened to split from NCSS because of feelings of alienation from the parent organization. And finally I treated the gulf that existed between social studies specialists and academic scholars. I recalled the heady days of the "new social studies" when historians, geographers, sociologists, economists, political scientists, anthropologists, and psychologists joined with classroom teachers and social studies specialists to reconsider the content and methods of teaching social studies in elementary and secondary schools. By 1981 nearly all of those scholars had gone on to other tasks, and the projects that they had inspired were completed and in some cases forgotten. I also noted that on college campuses it was rare to find close collaboration between social studies faculty in schools of education and academic scholars in colleges of arts and sciences. Only when the Federal government stipulated collaboration as one of the terms for accepting a grant would one find collaboration between the two camps. It seemed to me that we understood the importance of collaboration but would do so only when we were paid to collaborate.

These three gulfs seemed to me to account for the malaise confronting social studies in 1981. The existence of the gulfs made it difficult to resolve some of the basic problems that social studies needed to solve. I chose two problems and labeled them as "priorities". My two priorities were: 1) establishing a new scope and sequence for the social studies and 2) reexamining the purpose of values instruction in the social studies.

PRIORITIES

In theory, school curricula were determined by each state and modified by local school districts within the range allowed by each state. In fact, we had an unofficial national curriculum that was represented by the textbooks used in schools, and textbook publishers were influenced mightily by the large state-adoption states. While there were minor differences among the states, the essential curriculum had changed little in the 65 years preceding the publication of the Yearbook. This seemed to me to be a serious weakness. Conditions had changed greatly since the 1916 commission report that heavily influenced the scope and sequence of school social studies. The world was a different place; new academic knowledge had become available; attendance patterns in schools had changed markedly. Only the curriculum had remained stable. Despite all of the efforts of the "new social studies" projects to change the content and methods of the courses, with the demise of the funded projects, the curriculum had reverted to its past.

I also felt that the social studies was in a state of confusion regarding purposes and approaches to values instruction in the social studies. I wrote: "More confusion and uncertainty surrounds the responsibility of social studies teachers for instruction in values than for any other aspect of their work. Should teachers indoctrinate students with certain values? Should teachers remain neutral on value questions? Should teachers merely help students arrive at their own judgments regarding value issues? These are some of the questions that plague the field." Some of the confusion was probably a result of changes occurring in society. Some of the confusion came from demands placed on teachers to help improve society. Confusion also arose when teachers attempted to employ attitudes and methods of

inquiry employed in social science inquiry to value-laden issues. The result was that teachers found themselves in cross-pressure situations without clear guidance from the profession.

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON THE SOCIAL STUDIES

The solution I proposed was the formation of a national commission on the social studies that would be charged with the responsibility for framing a new scope and sequence for the social studies and for developing firm guidelines for the treatment of values in the curriculum. I wrote: "I believe that the long-term survival of social studies in the school curriculum rests upon its ability to devise a new and widely accepted scope and sequence and to find defensible grounds for values instruction." I argued that commission members should be prestigious Americans, broadly representative of education, business, labor, the mass media, government, and other sectors of society in order to enhance its credibility. The commission should be assisted by a full-time professional staff and a number of working parties composed primarily of academic scholars, social studies specialists, and classroom teachers who can prepare working papers for presentations to the commission and eventual publication. The commission should be sponsored by all of the major, relevant academic and professional educational organizations. I warned, "Unless prestigious Americans are willing to serve on the commission and without the sponsorship of a coalition of organizations such as indicated above, very few results can be anticipated. The forces operating to maintain the existing curriculum are too impervious to influence". I wrote that the current national curriculum was largely a result of the work of a national commission and only another, equally powerful commission would be likely to change it.

I concluded the essay as follows: "It is hard to imagine how social studies could continue to survive when its leaders are unable to agree on what knowledge should be taught and when they are unsure if social studies has any responsibility for promoting core values of American society....American youth require a sound social studies education. Their needs are not being adequately served by a field in such anemic condition."

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE 1981 YEARBOOK CHAPTER

In 1980-81, when I wrote the Yearbook chapter, I was confident that I had a good understanding of the social studies field. I was directing a major social studies curriculum center; I was a member of a widely diverse, twelve-member, social studies education faculty at Indiana University; I had recently served as the President of the National Council of the Social Studies; I had directed one of the successful projects in the "new social studies"; and so on. Surely, others were as knowledgeable as I, but I felt confident that what I wrote in that essay was on the mark. I no longer feel confident of my knowledge of the field. In 1981 I was appointed dean of the IU School of Education and found my attention drawn to other tasks in education. I have recently retired from Indiana University and am no longer so connected to social studies organizations, groups, and individuals as I once was. As a result, I have not been very active in the social studies field for many years. My reflections on the present time should be measured by these admissions.

First, I should note that the Yearbook chapter was not well received when it first appeared. This was disappointing to me because I thought that it was one of the best pieces I had written to that point. Even some of my closest colleagues condemned it and expressed annoyance that I had written it. It did not seem that people disagreed with many of the major points, but that it was a disservice to the profession

to "air dirty laundry". I seemed to have violated a trust: One doesn't speak badly of one's profession and therefore of one's colleagues. It didn't seem to matter that I clearly was one of the targets for criticism identified in the chapter. The idea expressed by some was that many people were working hard to make social studies better; it was not an easy time to be in social studies because of criticism from those outside of the field; and therefore it was very destructive to have a leader in the field raise such criticism, even if much of the criticism was valid. I also suspect that some thought it was arrogant on my part to position myself as a critic of the profession. Others were offended by my assertion that social studies was dead but no one had noticed. The defensive reactions, I experienced from some critics, reinforced my view that the social studies field was fragile and not ready for self-criticism.

Second, my recommendation for a national commission was adopted, although I make no claim that the national commission that was later appointed was a result of my recommendation because others also called for such a commission. However, the commission that was later appointed fell far short of what I had in mind. I had warned that unless the commission included prestigious Americans representing many sectors of society, was sponsored by the major professional organizations, and was well funded, it would not be successful. The national commission for the social studies that was eventually appointed had few of the necessary attributes.

The commission did reasonably well, given the resources available to it, but it was doomed before it completed its work. It had little of the support it needed, within or outside of the profession. The commission consisted of volunteers who lacked the staff required for the job. The commission did develop a new scope and sequence for the social studies, but the end result was only marginally different from what already existed. There was insufficient time to do more. It avoided entirely the task of offering recommendations relating to the treatment of values in the social studies curriculum. While the conditions that led to the commission exist today, I see little interest or advantage in appointing a new commission. The factors that limited the commission a decade or more ago appear to exist today.

Third, I have only limited ability to judge whether the gulfs that existed in 1981 exist today. My general impression is that much is the same. The current demand for national and state curriculum standards and student assessment suggests that the gulf between the public and the profession remains open. The fact that classroom teachers confront multiple sets of standards, representing not only social studies but also history, geography, economics, and civics and government, implies that social studies specialists and academic scholars continue to work in separate worlds. Nor have I found much evidence from the journals I read and the presentations I hear that theory and practice have been joined much more effectively than they were 20 years ago. For example, there is strong interest in "character education" today. What are social studies specialists doing to address this demand in ways that lead to practical classroom applications? I am quite aware that one can find exceptions and identify individuals who bridge these gulfs; exceptions existed in 1981 as well. I am referring to broad trends, not appraising the work of individuals.

Finally, I now realize how naïve I was in 1981. I don't think that my appraisal of social studies was wide of the mark, but I was innocent in how it would be received. I have had the good fortune to work with colleagues at Indiana University who have very different ideas about what social studies should be. We often disagree, but it has rarely become personal. We have remained good friends while fighting vigorously over ideas. I realized in 1981 that my essay would likely stir up debate and looked forward to confronting counter arguments. Actually, little debate followed. The essay was rejected because it seemed inappropriate to many, not wrong possibly, but simply rude.

I don't know whether I would write a similar essay today. First of all, I don't know if present conditions would lead to a similar appraisal. But if conditions were similar, I would then have to judge if the profession is better able now than before to hold up a mirror and engage in self-criticism. The fact that there is now a special interest group within NCSS that calls itself, "contrarians", suggests that some among us relish the opportunity to debate the status quo.